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A chill wind is fanned by some in press

LOS ANGELES — Return with us now to the not-so-glorious days of the late '60s and early '70s, the Nixon years, when Spiro Agnewisms were spewed across the media landscape, when an administration waged virtual war against the press with Agnew proclaiming journalists "nattering nabobs of negativism" and trying to somehow suggest that the light of scrutiny, when focused on one's own government, was un-American.

Thomas Jefferson, champion of the independent press as a protector of our liberties, was turning in his grave. If he has been watching the news lately, he might have cause to stir again.

There seems to be a broad new perception of media "negativism" and anti-Americanism. The chill is on, the "fit" in "all the news that's fit to print" — and to broadcast — is under attack again by those who would redefine it in their own, narrow terms. What's disturbing is that an increasing number of shallow-thinking, self-styled patriots are buying into the new chill.

A press conference held here earlier this week between visiting television critics and NBC News President Lawrence Grossman was disturbing in its vitriol and ignorance. Astonishingly, the misguided thinking came from members of the press corps as Grossman was discussing — and admirably defending — his news division's role as a lightning rod in two recent press freedom controversies.

The first had to do with CIA Director William Casey's statement that NBC should be prosecuted for its May 19 report on the Today Show about intelligence secrets that were sold to the Soviets by former National Security Agency operative Ronald Pelton.

Oddly, there was little new about U.S. intelligence-gathering capabilities — Casey's area of concern — in that report. There was little, if anything, that had not already come out in Pelton's trial or been printed elsewhere. Grossman pointed out that NBC had a record of being sensitive to reporting matters that could endanger national security. He said the network, along with CBS and ABC, had held back what it knew in advance, for example, about the plan to bomb Libya.

"But," he said, "when the release of information is a matter of public record and has been widely reported previously with no protest or expression of concern from the authorities . . . then you have to wonder what really is behind the press-bashing."

What was behind it, undoubtedly, was government embarrassment at the continued breaches in security. But killing the media messenger is not the answer to securing those breaches. Calling attention to them, within commonsense limits, is part of the answer in a free society — so that there is em-

barrassment, so that security measures will be improved, so that other potential traitors will know there will be hell to pay.

Wisely, cooler heads prevailed within the Reagan administration after Casey's outburst. Demands that news coming out of espionage trials be screened — censored, actually — by the government were dropped. For where would potential press-chill laws end? Carried to a logical extreme, you might get, if not the Soviet Union, then perhaps something akin to the South African state, where coverage of anti-apartheid demonstrations is routinely prohibited.

The second, and more publicized, NBC News controversy — the interview it secured with Pales-

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tinian terrorist Abu Abbas — is what prompted most of the vitriolic gibberish at the press conference.

Two minutes of the interview by NBC correspondent Henry Champ with the man who masterminded the Achille Lauro hijacking were broadcast on May 5 on the *NBC Nightly News*. A more complete version of it, within the context of a documentary exploring *The Achille Lauro: A Study in Terror*, was broadcast Tuesday night.

In the interview, Abbas threatened to extend his terrorist war inside the United States itself and against Ronald Reagan personally. NBC was criticized for two things: giving Abbas a forum and, after tracking him down, agreeing to his terms of an interview only if his whereabouts at the time were not disclosed.

As for the latter, Grossman showed that such promises are not uncommon in the pursuit of information. In order to illuminate, to help better understand points of view, both just and deviant, the trade is a good one in the cause of journalism.

"Newspaper as well as television reporters have accepted such arrangements in the past," he pointed out, "in order to get interviews with Polish Solidarity leaders, Afghan freedom fighters, contra rebels, Soviet dissidents, IRA extremists and even those in the Federal Witness Protection Program."

Besides which, NBC was hardly hiding Abbas. Correspondent Champ simply tracked him down where he happened to be at the time, in Algeria. The man doesn't actually live anywhere. He moves around. And if NBC could find him, couldn't the CIA?

And yet, reporters from this nation's two largest television markets wanted to know why NBC hadn't "arrested" Abbas (as if news organizations had such power) and called the network "an unwitting, unindicted co-conspirator" of terrorists.

The bigger question — and the one it disturbed me to hear so many people even ask — is this

matter of providing Abbas with a "forum." This was not a situation in which hijackers in Beirut were staging obscene "press conferences" with hostages at gunpoint. This was an opportunity to learn what goes on in the mind of an enemy of the people.

"It is absurd to think that Abbas' recent appearance on American television is what has given him his clout," Grossman said. And of course, he is correct. Abbas' weaponry, and his willingness to use it, provides his clout. There was no television when a terrorist assassinated a head of state and plunged the planet into World War I.

"If our critics fear that the American public is so gullible as to fall for Abbas' propaganda," Grossman went on, "either they have little faith in the intelligence of the American people or they have undue faith in the power of Abbas' arguments."

A reporter from a small town challenged: Would it have been proper to have given Hitler air time to state his case against the Jews?

Grossman took a deep breath. "The answer is, if only we had been able to put Adolf Hitler on, if only we had been able to show the death camps, then perhaps the world would have awakened much earlier than it did to that kind of threat.

"The big problem you have is when nobody knows what the hell is going on. And I think there is a service to be performed in alerting people to what is going on in the world — as distasteful as it may be."

Amen.